Sacral Kingship and the Judaism of the Khazars[1]

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Khazaria determined the fortunes of Eastern Europe in the 7th-10th centuries. Khazars were a small nomadic Turkic people who lived in the outlying districts of the great Turkic Khaganate in the Eurasian steppe; by the 7th century they were able to strengthen themselves in the Northern Caucasus, withstand the charge of the Arab conquerors and even rival Byzantium in the North Black Sea, as well as lay claims to the power over almost all the peoples of Eastern Europe.

The real power of the Khazars spread over the Black Sea steppes from the Volga delta and the foothills of the Caucasus to the Middle Dnieper and even the Danube region. The impact of the Khazars forced the Turkic Bulgars who dominated over the steppes in the 6th-7th centuries to migrate with Asparouh's horde over the Danube where Bulgaria on the Danube was founded or between the Volga and the Kama where Bulgaria on the Volga was formed by the 10th century. The Bulgars who stayed in the Black Sea steppes and the Iranian Alans who lived in the Northern Caucasus and were partly resettled by the Khazars to the Don steppes formed the basis of the population of Khazaria: they left the archaeological monuments of the so-called Saltovo-Mayaki culture spread over the Khazarian territory including the Taman' peninsula and the Eastern Crimea – the Black Sea regions earlier dominated by Byzantium.

The Slavic tribes who lived in the forest-steppe and in the forest zone had to pay tribute to the Khazars. The Khazars sought to spread their domination to the North – to the lands of the Finnish Ves' which were rich in furs: the Khazarian king Joseph mentioned the Ves' among his tributaries when he described Khazaria in his letter to the Jewish high official in Cordoba Hasdai b. Šaprut in early 960s.[2]

The Khazarian rulers belonged to the noble Turkic clan of Ashina: the aristocratic parentage and the actual power over many peoples of Eastern Europe gave them the right to the title of the *khagan* – the ruler of the "nomadic empire" which in early medieval diplomatic hierarchy was

[1] This article was prepared within the framework of a program of the Presidium of the Russian Academy of Sciences (project "Khazarian khaganate: interaction with Byzantium, The East and Russia according to archaeological and written sources").

[2] Pavel K. Kokovtsov: *Evrejsko-khazarskaja perepiska v X veke*. Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR 1932.

similar to the title of the emperor. In the Byzantine diplomatic protocol the Khazarian khagan occupied the second place among the non-Christian rulers – just after the caliph of Baghdad. At the same time the Arab sources register a paradoxical "diarchy" in the Khazarian khaganate: the khagan was a nominal ruler, a sacral king (for this reason James Frazer described him in "The Golden Bough"), and lived almost without leaving his palace with his wives and concubines being "magically" responsible for the prosperity of his kingdom. Actually the leader with the Turkic titles *bäg, bey* (*khagan-bey)* or *shad* ruled the khaganate and commanded the army; such a diarchy was characteristic of the Turkic and many other early medieval traditions. In the Cambridge letter – the Jewish document from the early 960s close to the so-called Jewish-Khazarian correspondence between Hasdai b. Šaprut and king Joseph – the Khazarian khagan is called "the judge" and can be associated with the Old Testament Israelite leaders of the period of Judges.

The Khazarian rulers succeeded in strengthening their domination over Eastern Europe making use of the geopolitical situation of the time, especially in the interest of Byzantium which needed an ally able to withstand the impact of the nomads of Eurasia, the Magyars and the Pechenegs. Soon the Khazars adopted the mode of settled economy and urban life in their subject centers in the Caucasus – Belenger, Samandar and in the Greek towns in the North Black Sea Bosporus region – they ruled over Phanagoria, Germonassa – Khazarian Tamatarkha, ancient Panticapeos – Kerch and others. By the mid-9th century with the assistance of Byzantine engineers and, obviously, their Alan subjects they had constructed a system of fortresses in the Don basin, with Sarkel (Sharkel) as the main one. This system controlled the central region of the khaganate and the domain of the khagan whose brick palace was in the capital – Itil in the Volga delta.

"The choice of faith" – the state religion – by the Khazarian rulers was a unique event in the early medieval world. The rival of the Moslem states in the Caucasus and Christian Byzantium in the Black Sea, the khagan chose a "neutral" written religion – "Mosaic law", or Judaism, which spread in the Jewish city communities in the North Black Sea region (and in the Transcaucasia) from the late classical epoch.[3]

[3] Peter B. Golden: *Turks and Khazars. Origins, Institutions, and Interactions in Pre-Mongol Eurasia*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2010; Dieter Ludwig: *Struktur und Gesellschaft des Chazaren-Reiches im Licht den schriftlichen Quellen* (PhD thesis). Münster 1982; Vladimir Petrukhin: "The Decline and Legacy of Khazaria", in: Przemysław Urbańczyk (ed.): *Europe around the year 1000*. Warszawa: DiG 2001, 109-121.

One of the essential problems of the Khazarian Judaism is the sacral status of the Khagan who could be sacrificed by his commander-in-chief *bäg* if some misfortune occurred during his rule. Al-Mas'udi, the Arab author from the middle of the 10th century, described this ritual of human sacrifice as well as the Jewish religion of the Khazarian king (*bäg*) and Khagan himself. The "pagan" practice of the "Golden Bough" ritual, in which the king was killed, does not correspond to Judaism: Khazarian king Joseph did not mention this ritual nor the sacral status of khagan in his letter written in the 960-s to his Jewish correspondent Hasdai b. Šaprut.[4] Joseph described the conversion of his predecessor Bulan as a trick of a sly man (or cultural hero): in the form of traditional for mediaeval literature motif of "the choice of faith". Bulan asked the disputing Christian priest and Qadi which faith they could consider as true – the Christian answered that he preferred Judaism over Islam, and Muslim preferred Judaism over Christianity. Then Bulan declared that he "had chosen the religion of Abraham".[5] That is why the story of the Khazarian conversion was perceived from the times of one of the first European Hebraists, J. Buxtorf, as the literary legend connected with medieval Jewish desire of revival of their state and religious power. The problem is the common source of the Khazarian conversion to Judaism, namely Muslim as well as Christian (in the information of Christian of Stavelot and the Primary Russian Chronicle)[6] traditions. Shaul Shtampfer, in his recent provocative paper presented during the Sefer conference (Moscow, 2011), insisted on the legendary character of all the sources about the conversion of the Khazars, first of all he interpreted Joseph's letter as unreliable, which was compiled in the 11th century in accordance with the mythical lost ten tribes tradition.[7] One could suppose that the genealogy of Joseph and Jewish names of his predecessors-kings (Aaron, Obadiah

[4] The folklore of the "Golden Bough" does not correspond strictly to the social or historical reality – cf. on imitation of the ritual of the rebellion of princes against the king – see Max Gluckman's "Frazer lecture" in Max Gluckman (ed.): *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa: Collected essays*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe 1963, and motifs of the human sacrifice in the Germanic epic tradition (including the sacrifice of king Domaldi) – Aron Ja. Gurevich: *Individ i socium na srednevekovom Zapade*. Saint Petersburg: Alexandria 2009, 86-87.

[5] Kokovtsov, 98.

[6] Leonid S. Chekin: "Christian of Stavelot and the Conversion of Gog and Magog. A Study of ninth Century Reference to Judaism among the Khazars", in: *Russia Mediaevalis* 9/1 (1996), 13-43.

[7] Shaul Shtampfer: "Byli li khazary iudejami?", in: *Nauchnyje Trudy po iudaike. Materialy XVIII Mezhdunarodnoj jezhegodnoj konferentsii po iudaike*, vol. 2. Moskva: Sefer 2011, 9-67.

and so on) were artificial in Joseph's letter but the Turkic "totemic" name of the founder of tradition – Bulan ("Deer" or "Elk") does not fit the idea of the lost tribes.

As for the mysterious ritual of the "Golden Bough" (sacrifice of the khagan), I supposed that the traditional Turkic epic motif of the sacrifice of the king was spread by Muslim authors who were especially interested in fairy tales. But the same motif (struggle between khagan and his rival) was popular in the Khazarian prestige decorative art during 9th-10th centuries and spread in the periphery of Khazarian khaganate from Jugra (Ural) to Ancient Rus' (Chernigov).[8]

Why the Khazarian elite (if it was Jewish) continued to demonstrate the pagan motif of the Sacral kingship to the peoples (tributaries) of the Khaganate? There are no archaeological traces of Judaism in Khazaria: the tombstones of the ancient period with menorah and other Jewish symbols, known as blocks for building constructions in Tamatarcha (Taman' peninsula) and other Khazarian sites, demonstrate that there were no Jewish communities responsible for the old cemeteries.[9]

The so called Moses dirhams are the only archaeological evidence of Judaism in Khazaria but the Kufic invocation *Musa* (instead of Mohammed) *rasul Allah* is addressed to outer (including the Muslims) and not to inner "recipients".[10] One could interpret this mint as a trick similar to Bulan tricks: according to Islam Moses was really "the messenger of God" (*rasul Allah*). We know about five Moses dirhams that were found in four Northern European hoards, but traditional Turkic signs/runes dominated the Khazarian Coinage: We know about 77 runic "tamgha" dirhams, found in the hoards of the 9th and 10th centuries; 84 coins borrow the legend Ard-al-Khazar, "Land of Khazar". Traditional gentile symbols seem to be more common in Khazarian coinage. The searcher of this coinage an American numismatist Roman Kovalev ascertained that "three special issue Khazar coins were struck somewhere in Khazaria in the year 837/838 carries a specific and blatant message

[8] Petrukhin: "The Decline"; Vladimir Petrukhin: "A note on the Sacral Status of the Khazarian Khagan: tradition and reality", in: Aziz Al-Azmeh / Janoš M. Bak (eds.): *Monotheistic kingship: the medieval variants*. Budapest / New York: Central European University Press 2004, 269-275.

[9] Vladimir Petrukhin / Flyorov Valerij: "Judaizm v Khazarii po dannym archeologii", in: Aleksandr Kulik (ed.): *Istorija evrejskogo naroda*. Moskva / Jerusalem: Gesharim 2010, 151-162.

[10] Roman K. Kovalev: "Creating Khazar Identity through Coins: The Special Issue Dirhams of 837/8", in: Florin Curta (ed.): *East Central and Eastern Europe in the Early Middle Ages*. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press 2005.

charged with political-religious ideology tied to Jewish, Khazar and Turkic identity".[11]

The letter of King Joseph uses the same "message": he described the land of Khazars, the conversion to Judaism and the informed Hasdai that he is an heir of the Turkic leader Bulan who adopted Judaism. At the same time he recognized that he and his ancestors were not descendants of Shem – they were descendants of Japheth (Biblical Togarmah).[12] The question concerning Japhetic origin of the Khazars was seen as essential by the Karaite writer al-Qirqisani.[13] Khagan had to demonstrate his Turkic aristocratic (but not Jewish) origin and traditions to legitimize his rule over his subjects.

Roman Kovalev inspired by the Khazarian Coinage from 837/838 tries to correlate the most important events of Khazarian history with this period: he believes that the Khazarian *bäg* Bulan converted to Judaism sometime between 800 and 843 and that Bulan accepted the artificial Jewish name Sabriel. It was the time of the Magyar invasion of the Pontic steppe when the real power and charisma of the khagan was shaken and the *bäg* got a chance to perform a *coup d'etat*. The khagan became the sacral figure (with judge function – according to the Cambridge document). Really the *bäg* declared his actual status in foreign affairs in 840, when *bäg* and khagan sent an embassy to emperor Theophylos asking to build the fortress of Sarkel in the Don basin threatened by the Magyars.[14] Kovalev mentions another embassy to Theophylos which came from Constantinople to the Frankish Ingelheim in 839: but this embassy – from the people of *Rhos* – claimed that they had been sent *by their king whose name was Khagan*,[15] the *bäg* was not mentioned. Kovalev supposes the embassy was sent by a mysterious "Rus' khagan"[16] mentioned in later Muslim sources but if the Russians borrowed this Khazarian title in the 9th century the power of khagan should be real but not sacral. This title was

[11] *Op. cit.*, 230.
[12] Kokovtsov, 92; cf. for Arab tradition: Golden, 162-163.
[13] Zvi Ankori: *Karaites in Byzantium. The formative years, 970-1100.* New York / Jerusalem: Columbia University Press 1959, 67 ff.
[14] Gennadij G. Litavrin / Anatolij P. Novosel'tsev (eds.): *De Administrando imperio / Constantine Bagrjanorodnyj. Ob upravlenii imperijej.* Moskva: Nauka 1991, 42; cf. Golden, 178-179.
[15] Georg Waitz (ed.): *Annales Bertiniani*. Hannover: Hahn 1883 (= Monumenta Germaniae Historica SS Rerum Germanicarum 5), 839; cf. Ildar Garipzanov: "The Annals of St. Bertin (839) and Chacanus of the Rhos", in: *Ruthenica* 5 (2006), 3-8.
[16] Kovalev, 235.

actually present in the Russian tradition until the 11th century: Hylarion applied it to the Russian princes Vladimir and Jaroslav in his "Sermon on Law and Grace"[17] and the status of these Christian Russian princes was far from sacral.

The construction of the Jewish *coup d'etat* and crisis in Khazaria in the first third of the 9th century became a *locus communis* in historiography.[18] Peter Golden supposed that in this period the Khazarian elite adopted the Iranian (Sassanid) court tradition of sacral kingship translated by a Kwarasmian guard of the Khaganate. This cultural "translation" was not specially connected with conversion to Judaism.[19] Really both mentioned items of the Khazarian decorative art were made in Sassanid tradition. The possible dates of the conversion and emergence of the sacral kingship are under question.[20] From the point of view of archaeology the Iranian (Sassanid) influence in the Pontic steppe was great from the period of emergence of the Khazarian/Alano-Bulgarian (Saltovo-Majaki) culture in the 8th and even second half of the 7th centuries. But the most important evidence of the worship of sacral leaders are memorial shrines ("temples"). There are a lot of treasures (gold and silver objects) on the Pereshchepina and Voznesenka sites in the Middle Dnieper basin dated with pre-Saltovo period (the 7th – the first half of the 8th century). These rectangular enclosures have close parallels in the shrines of the Central-Asian Turkic leaders;[21] there were no burials inside these enclosures –

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[17] Hylarion stressed the non-Abrahamic origin of the Russian princes: Dmitrij S. Likhachev (ed.): *Biblioteka literatury drevnej Rusi*, vol. 1. Saint Petersburg: Dmitrij Bulanin 1997-1999, 26.

[18] Constantin Zuckerman: "O proishozhdenii dvojevlastija u khazar i obstojatel'stvah obraschenija v Judaism", in: *Materialy po istorii, archeologii i etnographii Tavriki* 9. Simferopol: Krymskoje otdelenije instituta vostokovedenija NAN Ukrainy 2002, 521-534; cf. Golden, 179-182.

[19] Golden, 187-189.

[20] Archaic origins of the Sacral Kingship in Indo-Iranian steppes are adressed by Tsvetelin Stepanov: "Razvitije conceptsii Sacral'nogo tsarja u Khazar i Bolgar epokhi Rannego Srednevekov'ja", in: Vladimir Petrukhin / Wolf Moskovich (eds.): *Jews and Slavs*, vol. 16: *Khazary*. Jerusalem / Moscow: Gesharim 2005, 317-325; and Boris Zhivkov: *Khazaria prez IX i X vek*. Sofia: IK Gutenberg 2010, 92ff, to compare the Khazar diarchy with the ancient mythological dualism of Mitra-Varuna, to link the cult of a sacred ruler of the Khazars with the "Great Goddess", unknown in the sources on the Khazars, but which fit the story of the "Golden Bough", etc.

[21] Anatoly K. Ambroz: "O Voznesenskom komplekse VIII veka na Dnepre – vopros interpretatsii", in: Anatolij Konstantinovič Ambroz / István Erdélyi: *Drevnosti epokhi velikogo pereselenija narodov*. Moscow: Nauka 1982, 204-221.

this we can see when we compare Ibn Fadlans report (from the 10th century!) on the secret burial of the khagan with human sacrifices and so on.[22] The ritual of memorial shrines disappeared in the middle of the 8th century. Something happened with the Khazarian royal rituals: Was it not connected with the conversion after the defeat of khagan in the war against the Arab army of Marvan in 737? The royal ritual disappeared but folklore memory about sacral status of khagan and his burial seems to have survived in Khazaria.

The historical situation, connected with the "pagan" folklore tradition, could brighten the "strange" story of Slavonic *Vita Constantini*: Constantine (Cyril) the Philosopher was invited by the Khazarian khagan to assist in the "choice of faith" because the Jews taught him to adopt their faith and the Muslims (the Saracens) enticed him with many gifts to convert to Islam. In the *Vita* the khagan was represented as an actual political figure whereas the *bäg* was not mentioned.[23] According to the *Vita* Constantine won the victory in polemics with the Jews and Saracens but a few Khazarian families adopted Christianity. Was it a real victory or a hagiographic compliment to the philosopher?[24]

The very beginning of the dispute was connected in the *Vita* with organizing of dinner at the court of the khagan (in Bosporus?). The first question was about the (aristocratic) origin of the guest and his respectable place at the table. Constantine answered that he was a "grandson of Adam" and this answer was respected as the proper one for a respectable guest. The dinner began with the blessing speech of the khagan: "We drink in the name of the God, creator of the universe" (*Пиемъ во имя Бога единого, створшаго всю тварь*).[25] The commentators of the Slavonic *Vita* agree that the name of the god mentioned in the khagan's speech was Tengri – the name of Turkic pagan supreme sky deity.[26] It seems to me that the khagan, according to *Vita,* followed a different tradition than Jewish myths as it is a Jewish benediction (*berakha*) known

[22] Golden, 170.
[23] Cf. Likhachev, vol. 2, 48: a "first councilor" – *bäg* (?) supported Constantine in the polemics against the Saracens; he appealed to his "Jewish friends" (cf. Ludwig, 163): the wording proposed by C. Zuckerman: Constantine "was adopted by the khagan *and* the first Councilor" (Zuckerman "O proishozhdenii dvojevlastija", 525) does not match the text of *Vita.*
[24] Cf. Golden, 182-183.
[25] Likhachev, vol. 2, 38.
[26] Ivan Dobrev: "Khazarska misija", in: *Kirilo-metodievska entsiklopedija*, vol. 4. Sofia: Marin Drinov 2003, 350; cf. Golden, 185.

in the Orthodox (Slavonic) texts (cf. the beginning of "The Sermon on Law and Grace" by Hylarion – "Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel").[27]

Constantine immediately continued the discussion about the tradition of *Adversus Iudaeos*: in his response the Philosopher proposed to drink to the God, his Word and Spirit, and khagan understood his response as a glorification of the Trinity. The Jewish myths insisted that the Law of Moses was the first one but the philosopher countered the argument by referring to Noahic laws. Moreover he stressed the special blessing of Japheth citing the Bible: "May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem" (Gen. 9,27). It is interesting that al-Qirqisani comments the same biblical text in connection with the Japhetic origin of the Khazars. Meanwhile according to the practice of *gijur* (conversion to Judaism) the converted got the status of the descendants of Abraham.[28] It was a real victory for Constantine because the khagan himself (according to the letter of Joseph) originated from the descendants of Japheth. The Khagan supported Constantine in his polemic. [29] But he was not baptized as his faith remained Jewish and this faith did not subjugated the Khazars to Byzantium but it was enough for Khazaria to become a partner of Byzantium and a part of the Byzantine Commonwealth after the Constantine mission. At the same time khagan was interested in actualizing of folklore memory of his sacral status as well as his aristocratic Turkic (and non-Semitic) origin to rule over the gentiles.

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[27] Likhachev, vol. 1, 26. Moshe Taube directed my attention to the oath that Ivan III gave to his brother in 1488 (quoted in Natal'ja A. Kazakova /Jacob S. Lur'e: *Antifeodal'nyje hereticheskije dvizhenija na Rusi XIV- nachala XV veka*. Moskva / Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR 1955, 150). The full wording, according to what Moshe Taube had noted down, is: "Князь же велики кляся ему небомъ, и землею и Богомъ силнымъ [творцемъ всеа твари]"; Lur'e, however quotes only until "силным" (cf. *Polnoje Sobranije Russkih letopisej (Sofijskaja II letopis')* 6. Saint Petersburg: Typographia Eduarda Pratsa, 238). The oath by sky and earth was traditionally associated with heresy or pagan survivals in medieval Russia (cf. Sergej Smirnov: *Drevne-russkij dukhovnik*. Moskva: University Press 1913, 255-283), but an appeal to sky and earth in the Old-Russian tradition can be traced back to Deutoronomy 23.1.

[28] Cf. the letter of Maimonides to Obadiah the Proselyte in Isadore Twersky (ed.): *A Maimonides Reader.* West Orange: Behrman House 1972.

[29] Likhachev, vol. 2, 46.

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Abstracts

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The essential problem of the Khazarian Judaism is the sacral status of the Khagan who could be sacrificed by his commander-in-chief *bäg* if some misfortune occurred during his rule. This "pagan" practice of the "golden bough" magic does not correspond to Judaism: Khazarian king Joseph did not mention this ritual in his letter written in 960-s. The traditional Turkic epic motif of the king sacrifice was spread by Muslim authors who were interested in the fairy tales. This motif was popular in the Khazarian prestige decorative art during 9-10th centuries and spread in the periphery of Khazarian khaganate from Ural to Russia (Chernigov). Why the Khazarian Jewish elite continued to demonstrate the pagan motif of the Sacral kingship to the peoples (tributaries) of the Khaganate? King Joseph himself wrote that he is a heir of Turkic leader Bulan, who adopted Judaism; at the same time he recognized that he and his ancestors were not descendants of Shem – they were descendants of Japheth (Togarmah). Khagan had to demonstrate his Turkic aristocratic (but not Jewish) origin and traditions to legitimize his rule among the gentiles.

Sakralkönigtum und Khazarischer Judaismus

Die Auffassung von einem Sakralkönigtum und einem rituellen Mord am jeweiligen Kagan bei den Khazaren gehört zum Bereich der Legenden, aber nicht zu den eigentlichen Gewohnheiten. Für seine eigenen Untertanen zeigt der Kagan eine Zugehörigkeit zum traditionellen Wertesystem, aber bei internationalen Beziehungen nutzte er den Status eines Anhängers einer monotheistischen Religion, nämlich des Judaismus.